

## What Does Research Tell Us About Teaching Reading to English Language Learners?

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As a classroom teacher, I was largely ignorant of, and definitely suspicious of, research. I believed that researchers could make their studies come out any way they wanted them to, and that a good teacher who reflected on her own teaching knew much more about how to be effective with her students than any researcher did. Later, as a university professor, I learned how important good research can be, and how difficult it is to do really good experimental research in a field such as education, where it is impossible to control all the variables.

For that reason, I was pleased in 1997 when Congress funded the National Reading Panel (NRP) to evaluate research about teaching children to read. The panel's charge was to review existing studies, choose those that were well designed and well implemented, and synthesize their findings. The results were published in 2000 (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000), and became the basis of the Reading First grant program included in the *No Child Left Behind* legislation of 2001. Although there was initially a good deal of controversy about the findings of the report, all U.S. elementary school teachers were soon very aware of the five "essential elements" of reading instruction (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension).

Teachers of English language learners (ELLs), however, were left to wonder if and how the findings of the NRP applied to their students. How do you teach phonemic awareness and phonics in English to students who can't yet hear and distinguish the sounds? How do you teach fluency to students whose control of the structures of the English language is still limited? How do you teach them grade-level vocabulary when their vocabulary knowledge starts so far behind that of their English-speaking peers? How do you teach reading comprehension in English when they don't yet comprehend the English language?

Now there appears to be help. In 2002, the U.S. Department of Education funded the National Literacy Panel on Language Minority and Youth to survey, select, and synthesize research on teaching language-minority students to read and write. Their report was published recently (August & Shanahan, 2006).

How much help will this report provide for teachers of ELLs? A preliminary review of the Executive Summary (August, 2006) and the section of the full report on "Educating Language Minority Students" reveals these four potentially important general recommendations:

1. **Literacy in the native language is an advantage.** We already knew this (see, for example, Collier & Thomas, 1997), and it doesn't help teachers working in situations where literacy instruction in the native language is not possible.
2. **Substantial coverage of the five essential elements of reading instruction helps.** However, this finding is based on only 14 studies that looked at instruction of the essential elements of reading with ELLs. Because of the small number of studies, this recommendation is based on the fact that there is nothing in these 14 studies that contradicts the findings of the numerous studies of native speakers that were reviewed by the National Reading Panel. Also because of the small number of studies, no specific practices could be advocated for teaching the essential elements of reading to ELLs.

3. **Reading programs for ELLs should include intensive language development as well as instruction in literacy strategies and skills.** This recommendation is not based specifically on the research, because there were no studies that addressed the inclusion of intensive language development in reading instruction for ELLs. It is instead a hypothesis drawn from several other findings: (1) native speakers benefit more from instruction in the essential elements than do ELLs; (2) ELLs with greater language proficiency benefit more from instruction in the essential elements than do those with less proficiency; and (3) instruction in the essential elements with ELLs has a greater effect on decoding and fluency than on comprehension.
4. **Instruction needs to be adjusted to meet the needs of ELLs.** The report, however, states that there is not enough research to be able to identify specifically how those adjustments should be made. I could find only seven specific suggestions that would be useful to teachers of reading classes that include ELLs:
  - Provide additional work on English phonemes that are not present in the students' native language.
  - If students are literate in their native language, focus on differences between that language and English, with less attention given to elements that will transfer.
  - Provide extra practice in reading words, sentences, and stories.
  - Use cognate words in the native language as synonyms when teaching vocabulary.
  - Identify and clarify difficult words and passages.
  - Consolidate knowledge of the text through the use of summaries.
  - Find appropriate ways to use the native language.

These seven findings do not constitute a reading program for ELLs. We obviously need much more research. However, given the fact that teachers cannot wait until research catches up with their needs in order to implement effective practices with their ELL students, I think it is important to look not only at the research that is available, but also at what experienced, reflective teachers of ELLs (and observers of those teachers) consider to be best practices. The rest of this article will discuss the implications of available research on instructional practices in the teaching of the five essential elements of reading to ELLs, based on the findings of the National Literacy Panel as much as possible, but also drawing on information from reliable sources such as *The Knowledge Loom: Spotlight on Elementary Literacy* (The Education Alliance at Brown University, n.d.), as well as my own experience.

## Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic awareness is difficult for ELLs because they may not yet have enough experience with English to be able to distinguish sounds that differ from those of their native language. There are three aspects of phonological awareness when learning to read in a second language that are important for teachers of ELLs to remember and incorporate into their instruction:

- ELLs cannot develop phonological awareness in English until they are familiar with the sounds of English. This means that before explicit instruction in phonological awareness begins, children should have extensive experiences with fun and appealing songs, poems, chants, and read-alouds that will allow them to hear and reproduce the sound patterns of English.
- Once explicit instruction has begun, modifications must be made to allow for more practice with sounds that can potentially cause confusion. These are sounds that either don't exist in the native language (most of the short vowel sounds of English don't exist in Spanish, for example), or sounds that are perceived as different in English but the same in the native language (such as /r/ and /l/ for speakers of Japanese, or /b/ and /v/ for speakers of Spanish). Because these differences vary from one language to another, teachers will have to become familiar with which sounds of English will need extra practice, depending on the language backgrounds of their students.
- Once phonological awareness has developed in any language, it transfers to other languages that are learned. Therefore, students who are literate in their native language will not need to develop this skill again in English; they will only need to become familiar with the sounds of English and to learn to discriminate sounds that are different between their native language and English.

## Phonics

Phonics can be problematic because ELLs often have difficulty discriminating between similar sounds, and because the English language does not have a regular system of correspondence between letters and sounds. Here are some issues related to phonics instruction for ELLs, with discussion of their implications:

- Systematic phonics instruction can be very effective in helping ELLs, even those at fairly low levels of language proficiency, learn to decode words. However, this skill does not facilitate reading comprehension if students' oral language proficiency is not developed to the level of the texts they are expected to read. For this reason, reading instruction should be combined with intensive development of the oral language needed to understand the text.
- The most effective reading programs for ELLs combine systematic phonics instruction with a print-rich environment that provides exposure to appealing reading materials in varied genres. Skills practice that is embedded in meaningful texts helps ensure that decoding skills don't progress beyond students' ability to comprehend the text.
- Many of the components of phonics instruction need to be modified to meet the particular needs of ELLs. For example:
  - Before phonics instruction begins, students must have the phonemic awareness skills they need in order to perceive individual sounds in words. This is particularly important for sounds that are problematic because of the native language.
  - Teachers must be aware of whether a student's native language uses a non-Roman alphabet or is non-alphabetic. Even if ELLs have had no instruction in reading in the native language, environmental exposure to a different writing system can negatively affect the ease with which they learn to recognize the letters of the English alphabet.
  - ELLs must be able to hear and reproduce English sounds with a degree of accuracy commensurate with their pronunciation abilities, before they are taught to make associations between those sounds and particular letters.
  - It is helpful to explicitly point out different letter combinations that have the same sound, and provide extra practice with them. Multiple spellings of the same sound can be very confusing for ELLs, particularly if they have had some reading instruction in a language such as Spanish, which has almost completely regular sound-symbol correspondences.
  - Teachers must pay attention to the meanings of the words used to teach phonics skills. Teaching students to decode words they don't know only reinforces the idea that "reading" is pronouncing sounds out loud rather than creating meaning.
  - Automatic recognition of frequent words is very important for ELLs, whether the words follow phonics rules or not. Although ELLs may develop good decoding skills, their lack of total proficiency in the English language will always slow them down somewhat. Automatic recognition of words can help mitigate this difficulty.
- Most ELLs will need additional time to master phonics. Given the need for extra practice to learn to hear and produce the sounds of English, to learn the meanings of the words used in phonics instruction, to learn the multiple combinations of letters that make the same sound, and to learn many more sight words than English speakers need, additional time for phonics instruction should be built into reading programs for ELLs.

## Fluency

Fluency is difficult for ELLs because their lack of proficiency in English slows down their ability to decode words and hinders their ability to understand the meanings of the words and how the words combine to produce meaningful sentences and discourse. These suggestions will help teachers adapt fluency instruction for ELLs:

- ELLs cannot achieve fluency in oral reading before they have achieved fluency in speaking. Repeated readings of texts that contain unfamiliar vocabulary and sentence structures will not increase fluency. When working on developing fluency, be sure that students are reading texts that they are familiar with and can understand. Students' own language experience stories are a very good choice, as are read-alouds that students have heard several times and discussed.
- ELLs' normal self-consciousness about accents and errors can affect their reading fluency, especially if they are asked to read aloud in front of the entire class. This effect will be magnified if students are openly corrected or criticized. Fluency practice for ELLs can be facilitated by having them read along with the teacher, or by reading chorally with a group. If individual oral reading is necessary, provide an authentic purpose for the reading (such as a theatrical

performance, or delivering information that the rest of the class needs), and let students practice first with a partner.

- Decoding skills, fluency in oral reading, and reading comprehension interact in various ways. The ability to decode words easily is obviously necessary for fluency, and it also facilitates comprehension by allowing the reader to pay more attention to meaning. Comprehension, in turn, facilitates fluency by making it easier to recognize new words. Effective instruction for ELLs integrates these three elements of reading (plus vocabulary learning) into the same lessons using the same text, as each element helps build and reinforce the others, producing a multiplier effect.

## Vocabulary

Vocabulary is difficult for ELLs; even for quite proficient learners, the extent of their knowledge of vocabulary is only a fraction of what it is for native speakers of English, and the failure to understand even a few words of a text can have negative effects on comprehension. There are many things teachers can do to help ELLs improve their reading vocabulary, including the following:

- ELLs need more vocabulary instruction than their native-speaking peers. If a native-speaking child enters kindergarten knowing about 5,000 English words, and an ELL with no previous exposure to English enters the same class knowing no English words, it's obvious that the same instruction for each of them will not produce the same results. Everything a teacher of ELLs does should revolve around vocabulary acquisition—explaining, demonstrating, drawing, repeating, reading, writing, and playing with words throughout every aspect of instruction.
- ELLs need instruction in different vocabulary words than their native-speaking peers. ELLs lack many of the basic words that native speakers know, so just teaching the vocabulary words that are suggested in the reading materials you are using will not be sufficient. Here are some of the many types of words that need to be explicitly taught:
  - words that are crucial for understanding a text;
  - words that are encountered in a wide variety of contexts;
  - frequently used words that contain word parts (roots, prefixes, suffixes) that can help students analyze other unknown words;
  - words with multiple meanings, whether spelled differently (homophones such as *to*, *two*, and *too*) or spelled the same (such as a dining room *table* and a multiplication *table*);
  - figurative language and idiomatic expressions;
  - academic words that indicate relationships among other words (such as *because*, *therefore*, and *since* to indicate cause and effect).
- ELLs need different vocabulary teaching techniques and strategies than their native-speaking peers. Handing out a list of definitions or asking students to put the words into sentences won't help ELLs learn the meanings of the words. Here are some things to keep in mind:
  - ELLs who are literate in a language that has many words that are similar in meaning and form to English words should be taught to recognize these cognates and use them to create meaning.
  - The meanings of words are acquired through multiple opportunities to hear, say, read, and write the words in slightly different meaningful contexts. Teachers will have to create these contexts in the classroom, since incidental learning of vocabulary cannot be relied on for ELLs.
  - Explicit explanations of unknown words should include contextual support through real objects, pictures or drawings, gestures, examples, demonstrations, or experiments that accompany the verbal explanations.
  - The use of context clues to infer meaning is not always successful with ELLs because they may not understand the context well enough to infer an accurate meaning.
  - Having to explain what a word means to other students helps develop comprehension of the full meaning of the word.

## Comprehension

Reading comprehension is more difficult for ELLs than for native speakers for various reasons. Three of the most important reasons are discussed here:

- ELLs are more likely than native speakers to lack the background knowledge necessary for understanding texts. ELLs' prior educational experiences may have been substandard or interrupted, so reading texts that assume certain prior knowledge becomes difficult. Even for students with good educational backgrounds, cultural differences and culturally based assumptions can result in a lack of background knowledge and thus loss of comprehension. Whatever the reasons for a lack of necessary background knowledge, before asking ELLs to read a particular text, teachers must identify information that is prerequisite for understanding the text, evaluate students' prior knowledge of these prerequisites, and fill any gaps that are found. The best kinds of activities for building background knowledge are those that get students involved in manipulating language and concepts, rather than just receiving information from the teacher. These include experiential activities such as science experiments, classification activities, role playing, previewing a reading and generating questions about it, and sharing predictions about the answers to those questions.
- The language level of the text to be read, compared with ELLs' language proficiency, is a major factor in how much they will understand of the text. Even advanced ELLs and those who have been redesignated as fluent in English will experience difficulty with unusual vocabulary, figurative language, very complex sentence structures, or unfamiliar styles and genres (just as many native speakers of English do). For this reason, the integration of intensive language development with reading instruction is highly recommended for ELLs at all levels of language proficiency.
- Reading comprehension instruction for ELLs needs to be modified to address their needs. Asking ELLs to read the same texts and do the same activities as everybody else will only result in frustration for teachers and failure for students. This is not a matter of "dumbing down" the curriculum or applying different standards. It is a matter of implementing the curriculum at a language level that makes it accessible to ELLs, while at the same time working to develop their oral language so they will be able to comprehend texts at higher levels. Here are some general principles for modifying reading instruction for ELLs:
  - Provide as much nonverbal support for reading comprehension as possible, including pictures, diagrams, real objects, gestures, acting, and graphic organizers. The support can be used both for helping students understand a reading passage and for assessment, so students can show what they have understood in ways that are not entirely dependent on verbal ability.
  - Explicitly teach comprehension strategies, such as reader-generated questions, summarizing, and monitoring comprehension. Remember, however, that teaching strategies is not enough; students must practice them with texts that are accessible at their level of language proficiency. If students don't experience successful application of the strategies, they won't even try to use them with other texts.
  - Plan interactive activities around reading and interpreting texts. Sharing ideas, comparing perspectives, and coming to agreement (or agreeing to disagree) are all ways that students use the language of the text in meaningful ways, and thus progress to higher levels of language proficiency and reading comprehension.

## Conclusion

The original intention of this article was to provide specific suggestions for modifying reading programs to meet the needs of English language learners, based on the findings of the National Literacy Panel. Because of the paucity of appropriate research studies, however, the recommendations made in the NLP report are not extensive enough to help teachers build appropriate reading programs for ELLs. I therefore looked beyond the NLP findings and included theory and experience as well as research.

I hope that readers will take this synthesis of research, theory, and experience and integrate it into their ongoing examination of what they do in their classrooms, what happens as a result of what they do, and why it happens. Research can tell us which kinds of practices are effective in general, but ultimately only individual teachers can determine what is most effective for them and the particular group of students they are teaching at the moment.

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